



Insight

No Political Opportunity Left Behind

DOUGLAS HOLTZ-EAKIN | SEPTEMBER 26, 2011

President Obama's jobs program is widely perceived as dominated by politics. What will happen today when he discusses his plans for the future of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act? Don't expect too much here, either. The basic game plan is to waive the states' requirements under the law in exchange for their signing on to *his* regulations. In short, it's another plan for unprecedented administrative hijacking of law (see *EPA, greenhouse-gas emissions*), expanding the Department of Education's power and presence in the states.

NCLB, signed into law in 2002 by Pres. George W. Bush, was a policy and political watershed that reached across party lines, but also increased federal involvement in education. Retrospection indicates clear room for improvements, but there have been only multiple failed attempts to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), of which the NCLB is the most recent version. Senate Republicans introduced five bills to fix NCLB in the last week.

This presents the president with an opportunity to show he is willing to work with Republicans, as Republicans have shown they are willing to work with him. But who will show up today: Will it be Obama the Campaigner, vying for more votes, or Obama the President, looking to lead?

If President Obama shows up for the speech, he will see the Senate legislative package as a bipartisan opportunity to help secure the country's educational future. The Republicans' plan is built on the president's own "Blueprint for Reform," and seeks to focus on the bottom 5 percent of schools: The federal government would intervene in the lowest-performing 5 percent, but would allow states to decide how to deal with the other 95 percent. The plan would remove NCLB's adequate yearly progress (AYP) metric. (The inability to meet AYP, and 100 percent proficiency by 2014, is the primary reason many states are attracted to NCLB waivers.)

The Senate plan also focuses, as the "Blueprint" does, on encouraging college- and career-ready standards. It would encourage accountability through financial reporting and transparency on student achievement and teacher and principal effectiveness. It would encourage the recruiting, retaining, and rewarding of effective teachers and principals, which the president supported in his "Blueprint" and the Race to the Top program. To recruit the best candidates into teaching, the bill would support alternative routes for state certification of teachers and principals — especially in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) — for mid-career professionals, military personnel, and recent college graduates. It would also encourage tenure reform and performance-based pay.

Many federal plans have been heralded as acts that would transform a nation at risk of drowning in mediocrity into the best-educated nation in the world; and yet, the achievement gap persists. The U.S. is still performing in the middle ranks of its international counterparts. Maybe it's time to give states a chance to show us what they can do on their own in education, rather than prescribe solutions for them.

Education Secretary Arne Duncan has said, while visiting swing states, "My absolute preference is for Congress

to fix [ESEA] for the entire country. But there's a level of dysfunction in Congress that's paralyzing. And we're getting to the point that this law is holding back innovation, holding back progress. We need to unleash that. We need to get out of the way."

Get of the way indeed. President Obama can work with the Congress. Candidate Obama, on the other hand, might reject the opportunity for a bipartisan reform. Which speech will America's students hear today?

This article was written by Doug Holtz-Eakin and Annie Hsiao. It originally appeared in the [National Review](#) on 9/23/2011.